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THE ENROLLMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CAN DECLINES BE PREVENTED?

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Foreword

When SREB published research on 1976 levels of black enrollment in higher education, there was good news to report: "the substantial progress of blacks in achieving access to postsecondary education." Research on national and Southern trends from 1976 to 1982 shows that the growth rate of black enrollment has declined and, in 1982, reached a hold even point. Since 1982, according to information from individual states, the number of black students in higher education is essentially unchanged; their proportion of total enrollment has declined slightly.

Beginning in 1981, the SREB Task Force on Higher Education and the Schools drew attention to the "growing public belief that educational quality was unacceptably low." SREB maintained: "Opportunity, quality, and diversity are not contradictory goals....The commitment to quality for the 1980s must address the special needs of black students...." In 1984, SREB reaffirmed this position in a report on measuring educational progress: "Educational progress must be measured in terms of participation and access. Policies which merely exclude students as a way of improving measured levels of achievement of a group do not promote educational progress or serve the public interest."

In 1985, SREB's Commission for Educational Quality, stated: "The greatest challenge is to find ways that will enable both access and quality goals to be met at the same time for the same students." This report is intended to help educational and political leaders in the South meet this challenge.

Winfred L. Godwin
President

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Meeting the Need for Access and Quality

Fewer black students will be enrolled in college in 1990 than today if present trends continue--and, black students will make up a smaller proportion of overall college enrollment. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the numbers of black students enrolling in colleges and universities rose dramatically. The relative proportion of black students in total enrollment reached record highs. In the late 1970s, however, the rates of increase in the enrollment of black students unexpectedly began to decline, and black students as a proportion of total enrollment decreased. The result is that the 1980s are developing into a period of stable or declining numbers and proportions of black students in colleges and universities.

The fact that black students are a growing percentage of school enrollments does not change the fact that there are declining numbers of black as well as white students coming through the elementary and secondary schools. And, the rate at which black students enroll in high school, which rose until the mid-1970s, has dropped. So, even though a larger percentage of black students is graduating from high school, there has been less growth in the number who graduate.

There has also been a major drop in the college-going rates of black high school graduates since 1976. When these developments are coupled with the significant differences between the academic preparation and performance of black and white students and the reductions in the buying

power of student financial aid, they form a set of circumstances that will make it difficult to improve the representation of black students in higher education.

Some believe the reduced growth in the enrollment of black students reflects a waning societal commitment to opportunities for blacks in higher education. They view the new emphasis on improving the quality of undergraduate education through such means as raising college admissions standards and implementing student assessment programs as a threat to the goal of increasing the enrollment rates of black students. Others believe that the declines are due to black students' disenchantment and frustration with higher education. Certainly, most would agree that a long-term failure to achieve increased enrollment and completion rates on the part of black students will threaten the well-being of the social, economic, and political structures of our society, especially since the proportion of blacks in the population, particularly the school-age population, is rising.

It is important to bear in mind that the college enrollment of black students began to turn down well before the current emphasis on quality improvement. There are compelling arguments that all students can gain much from the current quality improvement efforts. Black student access to higher education will be a hollow achievement unless it is access to a quality education. There are also concerns that certain quality improvement strategies might, when coupled with the other trends, make it more difficult to raise the level of black enrollment in higher education. The key question for states and institutions is: How can the goals of

increasing the enrollment and retention of black students in colleges and of improving the quality of higher education be achieved without sacrificing one or the other?

It is possible for states to take actions that will improve the quality of higher education and also will promote higher enrollment rates for black students. Building on the known relationship between academic preparation and college attendance is a key to promoting black students' enrollment in and graduation from colleges and universities. A solid background at every level in the educational process leads to later success. Programs to improve the academic preparation and performance of black (and white) high school students through "early intervention" are one promising example. Through such efforts, educational quality can come to mean access with excellence.

The Problem in College Enrollment

From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, black student enrollment in Southern colleges and universities grew by more than 290,000, reaching 462,000. Most of this growth occurred through increases in the number of black students attending predominantly white colleges and universities. In 1965, only 18 percent of all black college students were enrolled in predominantly white institutions; by 1976, the figure was 57 percent; and by 1982, it had reached 64 percent. Between 1970 and 1976, the rate of increase in the number of black students (74 percent) was twice as great as the increase in the number of white students. These impressive gains pushed the proportion of black students in higher education in the South to 15 percent of the total--still below their 19 percent representation in the population.[1]

Yearly gains in the enrollment of black students in higher education reached a plateau--at an annual rate of 4 percent--in the mid-1970s, then increased only 9 percent between 1976 and 1982. By 1982, growth was at a virtual standstill. Since 1976, the rate of increase for black college students has trailed the rate of increase for total enrollment by a larger and larger margin, bringing about a decline in black students as a percentage of total enrollment.

In short, the era of dramatic growth in the enrollment of black students in colleges and universities appears to have ended. And, unless current trends are reversed, the remainder of the 1980s promises to be a period of stability or decline in the number and proportion of black students in Southern colleges and universities.

Trends Affecting College Enrollment

High School Completion Rates

The size of the 14- to 19-year old black population is the fundamental demographic fact determining high school completion trends. Growth of this population accelerated between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, then declined slightly by 1982 (Table 1). There is now a shrinking population of black as well as white students available to complete high school.

Table 1

BLACK HIGH SCHOOL-AGE POPULATION, HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT, AND HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES, 1967, 1970, 1976, 1982
UNITED STATES

	1967	1970	1976	1982	Percent Change 1967-1970	1970-1976	1976-1982
		(in thousands)					
High School-Age Population[a]	2,723	2,905	3,385	3,304	6.7%	16.5%	-2.4%
High School Enrollment[b]	1,651	1,834	2,258	2,128	11.1	23.1	-6.1
High School Graduates[c]	402	443	614	667	10.2	38.6	8.6

[a] Population aged 14 to 19 years
[b] Total high school enrollment
[c] High school graduates for persons 18 to 19 years old

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics, Series P-20.

Gains in the number of blacks enrolled in high school between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s surpassed the growth of the high school-aged black population. The decline between 1976 and 1982 was also greater, indicating that the high school enrollment rate of black students increased until 1976, then declined.

Obviously, the most direct factor in determining black students' eligiblility for college is the number who graduate from high school. The group of 18- to 19-year-old high school graduates grew tremendously (53 percent) between 1967 and 1976, but showed a much slower rate of increase (9 percent) between 1976 and 1982. The percent of the 18- to 19-year-old black population graduating from high school also increased in this period, which helped offset the effects of a declining high school enrollment rate. But, even so, growth in the number of black students eligible for college enrollment slowed appreciably.

At virtually every age and level of education, blacks enroll in school or college at lower rates than whites. The rates for blacks increased until 1976, but since then they have declined.[2] The cumulative effects of these differences in enrollment rates reach major proportions by the time of high school graduation. In 1982, only 58 percent of the 18- to 19-year-old black population were high school graduates, compared to 75 percent of whites the same age.

The demographic prospects for increasing the number of blacks completing high school are not good. Declines in the population of preschool-age blacks occurred over the entire 1967 to 1982 period and, since 1976, the number of elementary school-age blacks has shown a steady

decline. In addition, the elementary school enrollment of blacks declined during the 1976 to 1982 period. The declines for comparably aged whites were greater, leading to an increasing proportion of the total being made up of black students. Nonetheless, a smaller population of high-school-age blacks can be expected. Therefore, the only way to increase the college-eligible pool of young black students is to raise the percentage of black students who attend, and graduate from, high school.

College-Going Rates

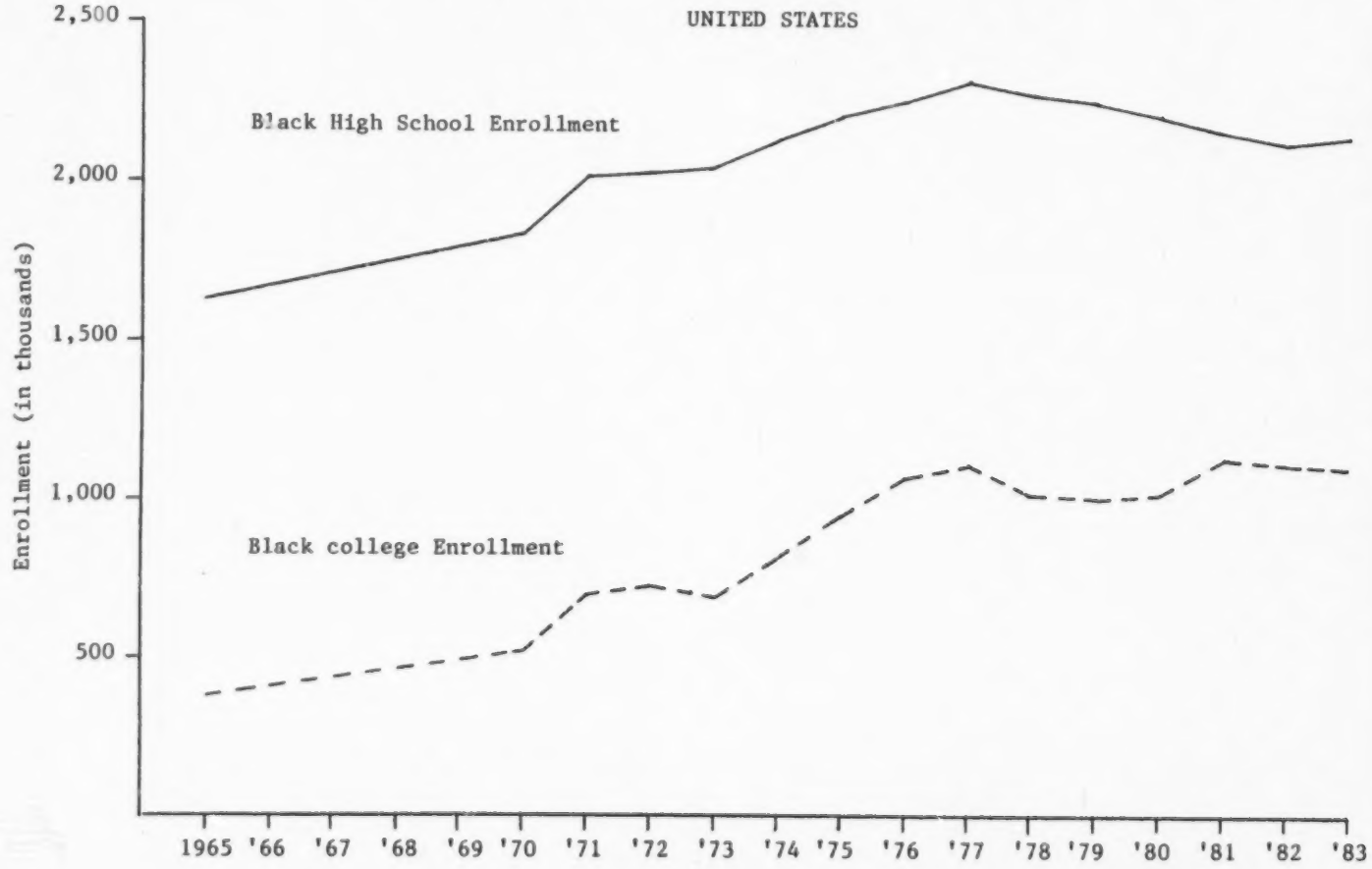
For blacks, college enrollment trends have depended more on the number of high school graduates than is the case for white college students. As high school enrollments declined, college enrollments increased for white students but not for black students (Figures 1 and 2). This is in part explained by the fact that the college-going rates of the 20- to 34-year old white population climbed steadily from the mid-1960s to 1982 while the rates for the black population peaked in 1976 and have declined since then.

Consider also the trends in high school-age population, high school enrollment, and high school graduation--the growth rates for whites have been lower, and the declines have been greater (Figure 3). Yet, the enrollment trends of white students in colleges and universities have not shown the declining growth rates seen in enrollment trends of black students, even though the percent of all high school students and of all high school graduates that were white declined over the entire period (Table 2). The representation of blacks among high school students and

Figure 1

HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE ENROLLMENT FOR BLACKS, 1965-1983

UNITED STATES

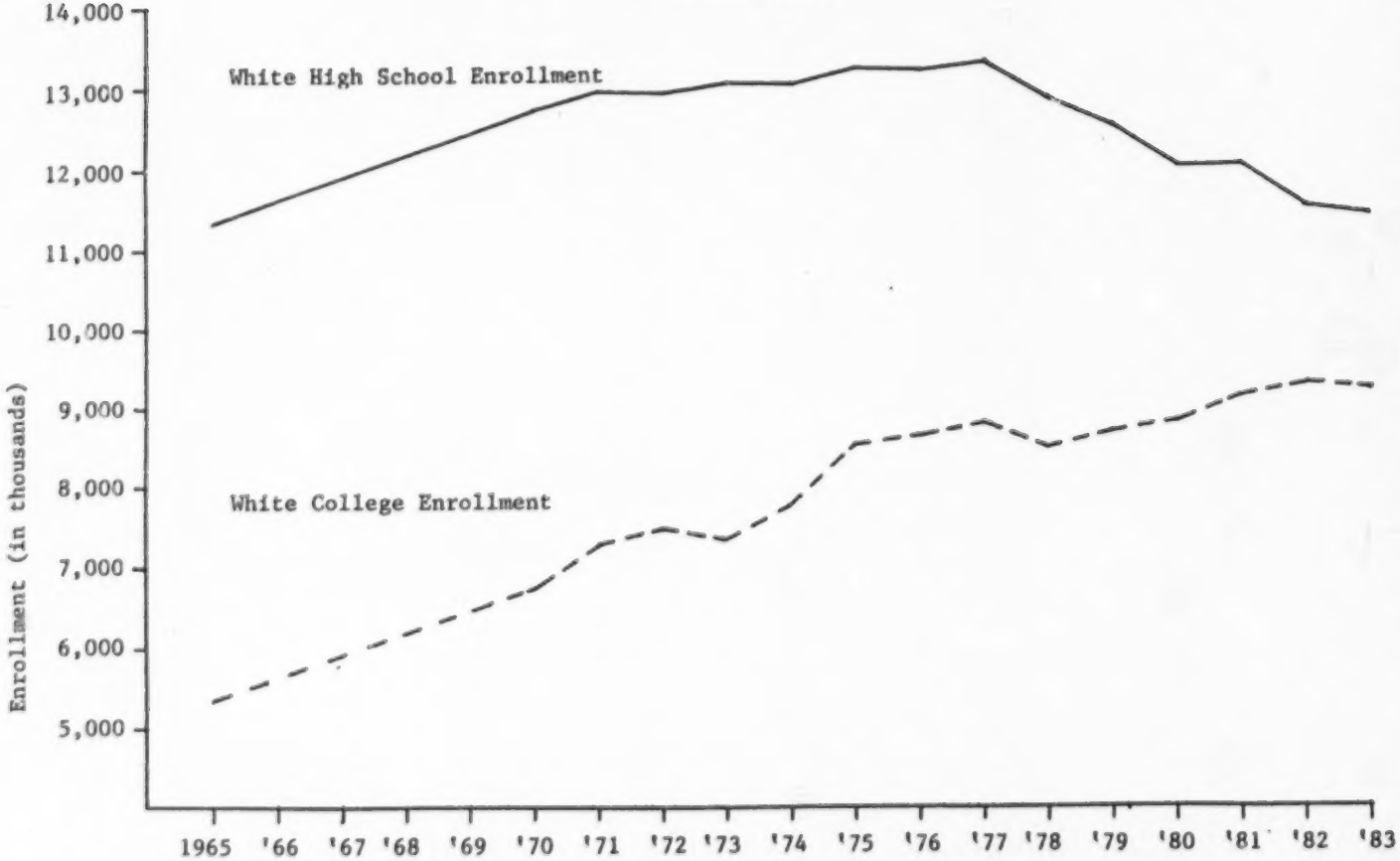


Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics, Series P-20.

Figure 2

HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE ENROLLMENT FOR WHITES, 1965-1983

UNITED STATES

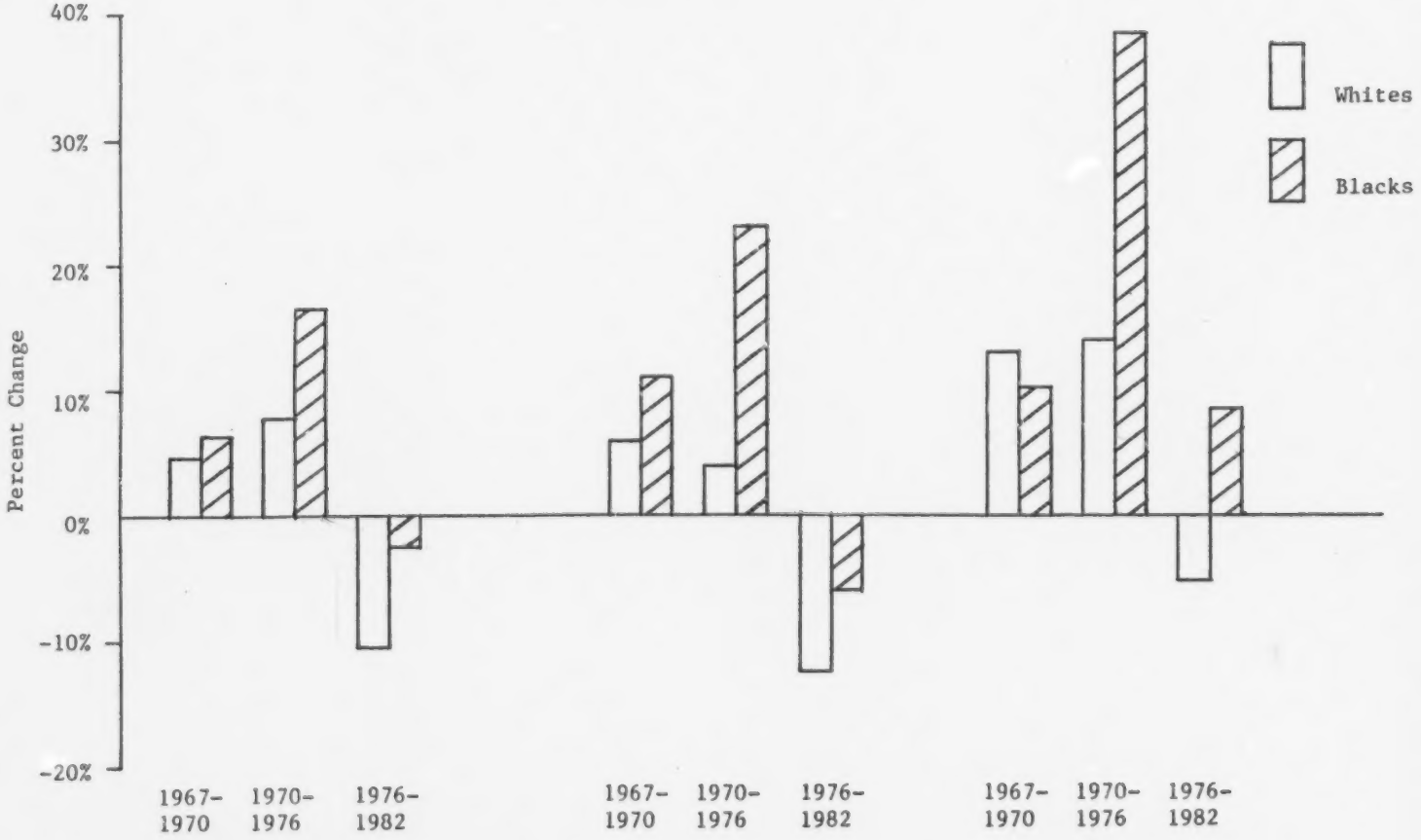


Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics, Series P-20.

Figure 3

PERCENT CHANGE IN BLACK AND WHITE HIGH SCHOOL-AGE POPULATION, HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT, AND HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES, 1967-1970, 1970-1976, 1976-1982

UNITED STATES



Source: Table 1

Table 2

REPRESENTATION OF BLACKS AND WHITES AMONG
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES AND AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS
1967, 1970, 1976, 1982
UNITED STATES

	Percent of High School Enrollment		Percent of High School Graduates		Percent of College Enrollment	
	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
1967	12.0%	87.0%	8.9%	89.9%	4.8%	92.3%
1970	12.5	86.5	8.7	90.1	7.0	91.2
1976	14.3	83.9	10.3	87.9	10.7	86.9
1982	15.1	82.0	11.5	86.0	10.3	85.4

Note: High school graduates for persons aged 18 to 19 years old
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics, Series P-20.

high school graduates increased steadily over the 1967 to 1982 period. But, the percent of all college enrollment that was black increased only until 1976, then declined by 1982.

Most important have been changes in the respective college-going rates of black and white students. The college-going rate of 18- to 19-year-old white high school graduates declined about 5 percent from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, then increased just over 2 percent from 1976 to 1982 (Table 3). The increases in the college-going rates of black high school graduates (over 4 percent) from 1967 to 1976 were widely noted as significant.[3] Thus, the decline of over 8 percent in the college-going rate of black high school graduates from 1976 to 1982 represents a major setback, which contributed heavily to slowing the growth of the enrollment of black college students.

Table 3

COLLEGE PARTICIPATION OF BLACKS AND WHITES
1967, 1970, 1976, 1982
UNITED STATES

	Percent of High School Graduates in College	
	Blacks	Whites
1967	45.0%	53.7%
1970	43.1	51.3
1976	49.2	49.2
1982	41.1	51.3

Note: High school graduates for persons 18 to 19 years old.
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics, Series P-20.

Given the declines in the population of young black students and in high school completions, the enrollment of black students in higher education may not increase unless the college-going rate of black students improves. Had the 1982 college-going rate of black high school graduates equaled the rate of white high school graduates, black student enrollment in college would not have dropped despite the decline in the number of blacks enrolled in high school.

The significance of the setback in the college-going rates of black high school graduates is revealed by the large reduction in the late 1970s in the growth rate of the number of black students completing four years of college. From the mid-1960s to 1970, the number of black students completing four years of college increased twice as much as enrollment (Table 4). Between 1970 and 1976 the number of 18- to 24-year-old blacks completing four years of college grew 60.0 percent, which was considerably lower than the rate of enrollment growth. Then, between 1976 and 1982, the number completing four years of college grew only 9.4 percent.

Table 4

BLACK COLLEGE ENROLLMENT,
NUMBER COMPLETING ONE YEAR OF COLLEGE
AND NUMBER COMPLETING FOUR YEARS OF COLLEGE, BY AGE
1967, 1970, 1976, 1982
UNITED STATES

	1967	1970	1976	1982	Percent Change 1967-1970	1970-1976	1976-1982
	(in thousands)						
College Enrollment	307	522	1,062	1,127	70.0%	103.4%	6.1%
Completed One Year							
18-24 Year Olds	---	226	293	383	---	29.6	30.7
24-34 Year Olds	---	89	194	377	---	118.0	94.3
Completed Four Years							
18-24 Years Olds	26	60	96	105	130.8	60.0	9.4
24-34 Years Olds	108	128	250	380	10.0	95.3	52.0

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics, Series P-20.

With these declining rates of increase, gains in the representation of blacks among the total population of those completing four years of college were minimal (0.6 percent for 18- to 24-year olds) between 1976 and 1982 (Table 5).

Table 5

REPRESENTATION OF BLACKS AND WHITES AMONG STUDENTS COMPLETING FOUR YEARS OF COLLEGE
1967, 1970, 1976, 1982
UNITED STATES

	Percent of Students Completing Four Years of College 18-24 Year Olds		Percent of Students Completing Four Years of College 25-34 Year Olds	
	Black	White	Black	White
1967	3.0%	95.9%	5.2%	93.9%
1970	5.3	93.4	5.2	91.9
1976	5.7	90.5	5.7	90.2
1982	6.3	91.5	6.9	89.6

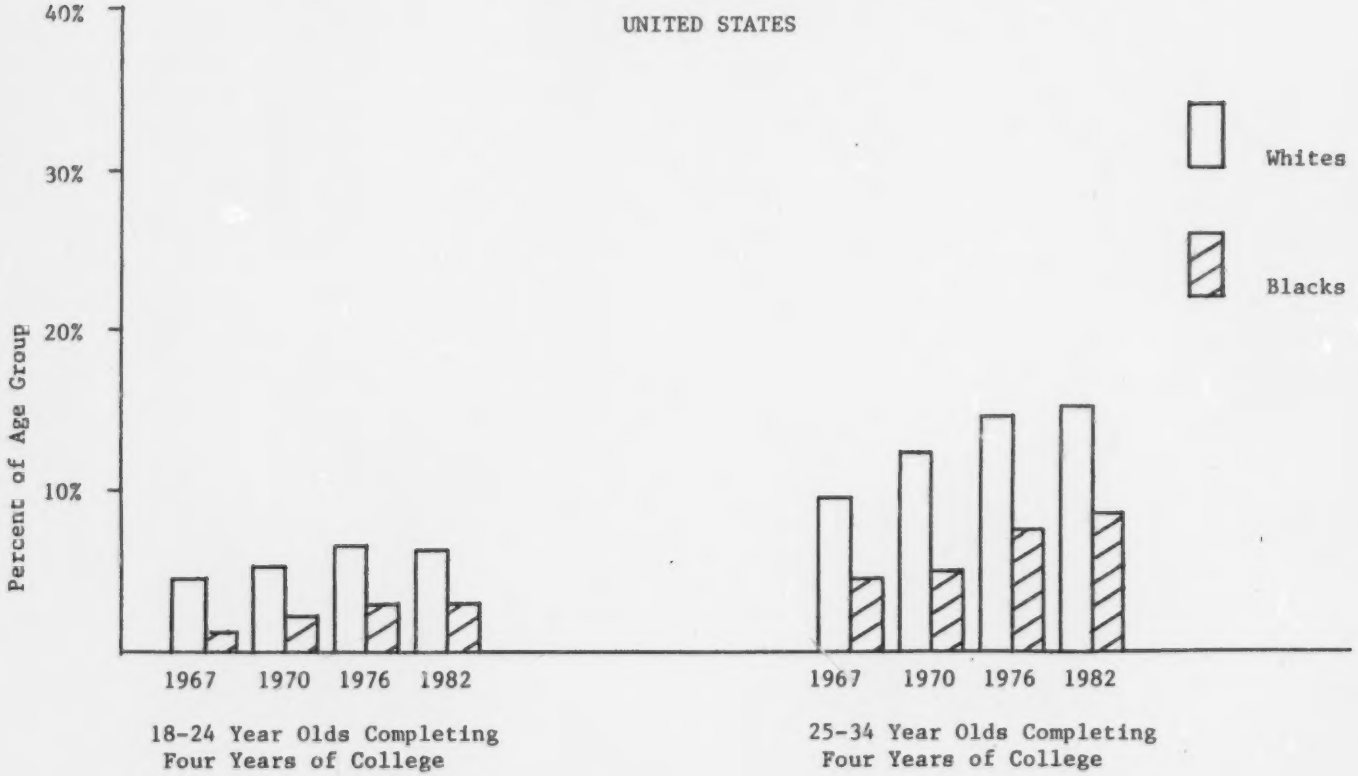
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics, Series P-20.

The result is that the wide gap between the proportions of the respective black and white populations who have completed four years of college remains (Figure 4).

Figure 4

PERCENT OF BLACK AND WHITE STUDENTS COMPLETING FOUR YEARS OF COLLEGE, BY AGE, 1967, 1970, 1976, AND 1982

UNITED STATES



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics, Series P-20.

Academic Preparation

The problem of the enrollment of black students in colleges and universities is more than a matter of how many black students begin a college education. More important is how many black students pursue their college studies and graduate. For both black and white students, research has shown that academic preparation (a college preparatory curriculum in high school), academic performance (high school grades and class rank), and parental education are the most important factors in promoting college attendance.[4]

The most definitive studies of high school students show a persistent gap between the academic preparation and performance levels of black and white students.[5] For example, on tests administered by the National Center for Education Statistics to black and white high school seniors, the scores of blacks were, on the average, significantly below those of whites. One-third of the black seniors were enrolled in an academic program; 34 percent were in vocational-technical programs. In contrast, 45 percent of the white seniors were enrolled in an academic curriculum and only 22 percent were enrolled in vocational-technical programs.[6]

Important differences in specific courses taken by black and white high school students were also revealed by these studies. Among white seniors, 81 percent had taken algebra I and 50 percent had taken algebra II. In contrast, only 68 percent of black seniors had taken algebra I and only 39 percent had taken algebra II.[7] Half of the white students had three or more years of math compared to 39 percent of black students.

Over 33 percent of white students had more than three years of science, while only 23 percent of black students were in this category. There is evidence of recently improved achievement levels of black students seeking college admission, but a serious gap still remains between the averages for blacks and whites.[8]

A 1985 pilot program of SREB and the National Assessment of Educational Progress provides, for the first time, comparisons between the reading proficiencies of high school juniors in selected Southern states, the South, and the nation. Test results show that black students in the nation as well as the South scored significantly lower than white students. The average reading proficiency of 17-year-old black students (eleventh-graders) was just above the average for 13-year-old white students (seventh-graders).[9] It was found that 52.7 percent of white eleventh-graders nationally and 55.8 percent in the South possess reading proficiency that is probably adequate for college-level work without the need for remedial education. Only 20.1 percent of the nation's and 17 percent of the South's black eleventh-graders showed this level of reading proficiency.

Student Financial Aid Programs

Needs-based student financial aid programs, especially those of the federal government, were designed and implemented to assist financially needy students to gain access to higher education.[10] Many believe that the substantial increases in the enrollment of black students in college, which continued until the mid-1970s, demonstrate the success of these

programs.[11] By 1976, for example, minority representation in federal aid programs was two and one-half times greater than minority representation among college students--ranging from 43 percent in the Pell Grant Program to 17 percent in the Guaranteed Student Loan Program. (Roughly 60 percent of minority recipients are black.)

When the growth in the number of black students peaked from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, constant dollar growth in grant programs far exceeded growth in loan programs. Aid awarded in federal general grant programs rose from $325 million to $2 billion, while aid awarded in federal general loan programs remained steady at about $3 billion. Since the mid-1970s, however, constant dollar growth in loan programs has exceeded growth in grant programs. Grant aid rose to $3.4 billion, while loan program aid grew to $7.7 billion.[12] By 1980-81, loans from the federal government had grown to 40 percent of all financial aid (Table 6).

Have changes in the availability, amounts, and distribution of student financial aid since the mid-1970s contributed to the declines in the growth rate of the number of black students enrolling in college? Research has shown that the types and amounts of financial aid offered to black students play an important role in their enrollment and retention decisions. The more aid offered and the larger the grant component compared to the loan component, the greater the stimulus to enrollment.[13]

In the late 1970s, as a result of the Middle Income Student Assistance Act, the federal financial aid emphasis shifted from needs-based aid to

Table 6

PERCENT OF STUDENT FINANCIAL AID AWARDED
BY FEDERAL, STATE, AND INSTITUTIONAL SOURCE
1963-64 TO 1980-81
UNITED STATES

		Percent of Aid Awarded			
		1963-64	1970-71	1975-76	1980-81
Federal					
	General				
	Grants[a]	*	3%	11%	18%
	Loans[b]	21%	28	16	40
	Work Study	*	5	3	4
	Special				
	Grants[c]	14	39	51	22
	Loans[d]	*	1	*	*
Sub-Total		35	76	81	84
State	Grants	10	5	5	5
Institutional	Loans & Grants	55	21	14	12

* Less than one percent.

a Pell, Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG), Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (SEOG), State Student Incentive Grants (SSIG)

b National Direct Student Loans (NDSL), Guaranteed Student Loan (GSL), Parent Loans for Undergraduate Students (PLUS)

c Social Security, Veterans, Other

d Other Loans (e.g. Health Professions Loans)

Note: Columns may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Derived from Trends in Student Aid: 1963 to 1983, The College Board, 1983.

assist low-income (largely minority) students to non-needs-based aid to assist middle income (largely white) students.[14] Since the needs-based programs were to continue with expanded eligibility rules, the implementation of this act was not expected to diminish the utilization of financial aid programs by minority students. But, as the Middle Income Student Assistance Act was implemented, minority students' use of financial aid programs did decrease. The proportion of aid recipients from minority groups in the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant program fell from 48 percent in 1974-75 to 42 percent in 1976-77.[15] By 1981-82, only 32 percent of aid (both grant and loan) recipients in public colleges were from minority groups; their utilization rate declined to 29 percent by 1983-84. This represented a 12 percent decline in the number of recipients from minority groups over a time period when the number of non-minority recipients grew 2 percent.[16] Some have characterized these changes as a "trading down among students, from more expensive to less expensive schools and from less expensive schools to nonenrollment."[17]

Because total grant dollars awarded grew as well, it is necessary to ask how the tremendous growth in loan monies relative to grants could contribute to the decline in the enrollment growth rates of black students in colleges and universities. Since the mid-1970s, grant aid, when adjusted for inflation, has not kept up with the growth in college enrollments. The amount of grant aid per student has declined since 1975-1976, as has the constant dollar value of the average grant.[18] A Pell Grant would have to equal $3,000 today to be equivalent to the $1,600 maximum grant possible in 1974, but the 1983-84 maximum was only $1,800.[19] By 1982-83, the dollar value of a Pell Grant had declined to only about

30 percent of student costs in public universities, one-third less than in 1978-79.[20]

It appears, then, that the growth in financial aid grants has resulted from making aid available to a wider variety of students, and more money has been spread thinner among grant recipients.[21] This would have the most adverse effects on the enrollment behavior of black students, 50 percent of whom in 1981 were in the highest need group, compared to only one out of ten white students who fell in that category.[22] The median income of black families, as a percent of that of white families, was 55 percent in 1982--at its lowest point since 1972.[23]

Thus, the growth in total federal grant funds may not have been adequate to continue to promote the enrollment of members of minority groups, and the increased loan funds available were not an acceptable form of financial aid to most minority-group students. Students who come from families with incomes of about $13,600 (the median income for black families in 1982) are reluctant to borrow what seems to them an extraordinary amount of money.

Targets for State Action

Among the many questions facing state higher education leaders, the central issue about black collegiate enrollment trends is whether current circumstances can be altered to renew growth without abandoning quality improvement. How can the goals of increasing the enrollment of black students and improving the quality of higher education be achieved without sacrificing either?

Changes in the number of black students eligible for college have contributed both to the acceleration in the 1960s and early 1970s and to the decline (since the mid-1970s) in the number of black students enrolling in colleges and universities. Some of these changes cannot be directly influenced by educational policies and programs. For instance, the number of high school-aged blacks peaked in 1976 and will continue to decline for many years. But, some of these trends can be altered by state policy. The number of black students enrolled in high school has been shrinking faster than the number of black high school-age youth. While the high school graduation rate of black students has increased, a gap still remains between the rates of blacks and whites, and further increases in the rate of completion for blacks would stimulate the college enrollment of black students. The recent major setback in the college enrollment rate of black high school graduates can also be addressed. Educational improvements can have a positive influence on these trends.

The differences in academic preparation and achievement between black and white students define a most important target for attention from state

leaders. Building on the known relationship between academic preparation and college attendance is a key to promoting the enrollment in and graduation of black students from colleges and universities. A solid background at every level in the educational sequence breeds later success. Through efforts to improve the academic preparation, involvement, and achievement of black students, the goal of increasing the enrollment and graduation rates of black students and the goal of upgrading the quality of higher education can be achieved without sacrifice to either. Indeed, educational quality can mean access with excellence.

Several states are developing or implementing "early intervention" programs to identify, during the high school years, students whose preparation and achievement levels are insufficient for college-level academic work. Louisiana, for example, recently enacted legislation that requires the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Board of Regents to devise and adopt a program of additional academic assistance for college-bound students having limited preparation and achievement levels. Effective May 31, 1987, college-bound students identified as needing such assistance will be required to participate in the program either during the summer or through an extended school-day program while they are still in high school.[24] Higher education institutions in Louisiana and Florida will also be required, as those in Georgia and South Carolina have been, to report to the high schools on their students' college performance. An Early Placement Testing Program, a cooperative effort of the Ohio Board of Regents and the State Board of Education, offers voluntary testing to high school juniors to identify deficiencies in mathematics preparation. A model college preparatory course is available to high school students with severe deficiencies and additional high school mathematics courses are recommended for those with lesser deficiencies.[25]

Quality improvement and increases in the college enrollment and graduation rates of black students are both high priorities. The enrollment increases of black students began to decline before the recent quality improvement reforms. State actions to improve the quality of higher education which also will promote higher enrollment rates for black students are possible. Programs to improve the academic preparation and performance of black students meet these criteria.

State-supported student financial aid currently represents only about 5 percent of all student aid available.[26] In this context, there are limits on the impact that state policymakers can have to stimulate increases in the enrollment of black students through financial aid. It has been suggested that states study tuition reduction plans, and expanded state student aid programs, including loan forgiveness for public service programs and becoming more involved in operating loan guarantee agencies.[27] But the greatest impact can be achieved through initiatives to redirect federal student financial aid programs that would renew increases in the enrollment of black students.

There is a related area in which state policy action could also prove highly effective. Some have attributed much of the stabilization in the college enrollment rates of black students to the inadequacies of the procedures and networks to inform prospective black students of the variety of financial aid programs available and the necessary application process.[28] Improving statewide programs to provide more complete information earlier to students and parents would be another significant state contribution to promoting increases in the college enrollment rates of black students.

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